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JAPANESE PRINTS

By Charles Hovey Pepper

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WALTER KIMBALL AND COMPANY

Thirty-one Beacon Street BOSTON Massachusetts

In The Garden. Katsukawa Shun'ei.

Free Gallery of Art

Washington, D. C.

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Japanese Prints



THE Japanese in the early history of their art turned to the Chinese for guidance and inspiration, as formerly Italians to Greece, Germans and French to Italy, and Americans to Europe.

So that early Japanese art cannot be said to be distinctively national. This adopted and adapted art was that of the aristocrat.

As has repeatedly occurred in the history of European art, this established classicism was disallowed by a group of artists who gave themselves, with no small self-denial, to the portraying of the actual life of the people for those people. They depicted the homely scenes of every day for those who thoroughly appreciated and enjoyed their art but who could pay but little for the work.

At first rapid reproductions of a painting were made. Later, adopting from China block cutting, an outline printed in black was used and the color filled in by hand. Still later and by natural sequence, color blocks were used, and in this way most naturally grew the art of Uki-yo-ye, Nishiki-ye, or Japanese Prints.

The production of a print was the work of three men. In the first place the artist makes on thin paper with his brush filled with pale India ink, the preparatory drawings. Having freely "felt" for his drawing he establishes it roughly with a darker ink, at times introducing subsequent changes in red. This is then covered by a fresh sheet of thin paper, and the final drawing, free from all corrections, is produced. This drawing is for the outline of the proposed print.

The next step is to send the drawing to the block cutter who pastes it face down on a prepared block of cherry wood and cuts with a sharp knife on each side of the lines and



with gouges and chisels works out the intervening wood. If the lines of the drawing, when pasted on the wood, fail to show clearly, the block cutter first rubs away with a moistened hand, some of the fibre until the lines to be cut show well. This is a most delicate piece of carving and when one sees with what accuracy the character and individuality of the line is preserved, that even accidental irregularities caused by the spreading of a partially dry brush passing over the paper, have all been kept, the art and the artisan command our admiration. It seems to me in view of the quality of the work, a great pity that the names of the block cutters have not been handed down to us along with those of the artists.

When this most exacting work has been completed the block is washed and the last trace of the original drawing disappears. The block is then inked and impressions taken, giving an exact replica of the original drawing. Several of these impressions are then

Carp, Leaping a Waterfall.
Kaisai Ycisen.

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sent to the artist who arranges his series of color blocks. The process of cutting the color blocks is the same as that used in cutting the outline block or "key block." In the more elaborate prints as many as fifteen or eighteen blocks are used, but with five or ten, most admirable results are produced.

Finally the series of blocks is now ready for the printer, who prepares under the direction of the artist his pots of water color, and the first proof is ready to be made.

The paper is dampened slightly as in printing etchings, and is placed in a pile before the printer. He takes a color block and with a coarse brush distributes his color smoothly on the block. Taking a piece of the paper he fits the right lower corner into a notch and lets it fall to a line cut in the lower edge of the block and then with a pad covered with the husk of bamboo he rubs the back of the paper and draws his impression. The other color blocks are used in a like manner and a final impression in black from the key block finishes the proof.

Certain changes may be suggested and made in the colors, and when finally a satisfactory proof is drawn, enough color of each sort is mixed to print the entire edition, and the printer pushes ahead with one block until he has completed the edition, and then attacks the pile of damp paper again and again until each successive color block and the key block in black have been used.

As the color is mixed with a glue sizing the new prints send up a decided odor which is often a means of detecting them from old prints. For with time this odor disappears.

In this way then the prints were made and were for centuries enjoyed by the Japanese people. The first examples, little prized, were brought to Europe by the Dutch merchants who were trading with the Japanese and had an open port at Nagasaki. It was not until late in the Nineteenth Century that any considerable attention was given to the prints, and then it was through the appreciation of artists that they came to have their rightful place in the field of art.

It was from Paris that the great stimulus came some twenty-five or thirty years ago and de Goncourt, Gillot, Bing, Hayashi and Gense are familiar names to collectors, as in this country are the names of Brinkly, Fene-
lossa (who assembled the Boston Museum collection), Ross, Happer (who has perhaps the most complete collection of Hiroshige existent), Freer, Morse and in England, Anderson, Holmes and Strange.

Through the efforts of these men they were classified; representative examples were placed in Museums, and to the connoisseur of art, to the lover of the beautiful, a new delight was made possible. The growing popularity of these Nishiki-ye would have been impossible except for their intrinsic worth.

Let us ask ourselves why we like them and why they are worth the attention they receive.

In the first place they stand for simplicity. They eliminate all unessentials and present

only the essentials for the pleasurable transmittance of an impression.

One stands in a heavy rain storm and the strong impression is the driving, slanting rain coming in sheets, the bending of the trees with the violence of the wind, the heavy sky, the indistinctness of distant hills and trees. These are the things which are most in evidence. There are many other most interesting things of minor importance, but these are eliminated by the Japanese Nishiki-ye maker. He holds unswervingly to the few essentials and as a result, with a power and freshness that is remarkable, transmits the storm. When he has said the word he stops. His art is selective, analytical, surgical, dissective, preconceived, assertive. There is no slop, no fumble, no muss. He has something to say; decides how best to say it, and does so in a few decisive words, as complimentary to our ability to comprehend as it is skilful in its presentation. There is a mental stimulus in this, a pleasurable

feeling of being in the confidence of the artist, who recognizes you as an aesthetic equal. He suggests with a perfect confidence in you as able to grasp the whole. It is this deliberate simplicity which gives these Nishiki-ye their freshness, crispness and force. In looking at them there is a decided twang, an aesthetic shock.

In addition to this simplicity there is in these prints a consideration and knowledge of line rhythm and flow and balance which is a delight in itself. The brush, long pointed, well filled, sensitive to every slightest mental variation in those most obedient and sensitive fingers which have held it from childhood — in fact, which came into being with an inherited brush facility — gives the Japanese artist at once an advantage over the European with his ragged and scratchy pencil or pen. No line could be more sinuous and seductive, more sensitively shaded, more responsive to the slightest mental attitude. There is a studied balance and contrast of

line which is of itself a great delight — such delight as the work of Botticelli, Ghirlandajo, Lippi, Francia and Gozzoli gives one. In fact, Harunobu, Koriusai, Kiyonaga, Utamaro and Yeishi have much in common with the early Italians. For a short time, at least, the eastern and western point of view was much the same.

In addition to the qualities of simplicity and rhythm of line, a great charm in the Nishiki-ye is the notan or spot, the balance of color weight. This is necessary to good art; it is evident in the best canvases of all time. It is too often a matter of accident, and too many otherwise fine canvases have been weak for its lack. This matter the Japanese have most carefully studied, and these Nishiki-ye are a rich school for the study of this essential.

The prints are probably most popularly prized for their color harmonies and contrasts. What a gamut! Prints so subtle and delicate that they whisper color; so

MR. JOHN STEWART HAPPER.

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bold and assertive that the whole brass band proclaims them. Prints full of color suggested in blacks and grays, and frankly and flatly insistent in the primaries, they display a scientific knowledge in the matter of juxtaposition and relative quantity of color that is nowhere excelled or equaled save in the wings of butterflies and beetles. You see ten; the eleventh offers a new surprise: you see a hundred, and there is yet a new surprise. You are thrilled with the pleasure of an unusual combination of colors and you wonder at the daring which would even conceive it.

It is along these lines that the Japanese have taught and are teaching us much. If the object of a picture is to give pleasure and if in simplicity, right spotting, line and color pleasure is found, why should these be ignored? Whistler woke long ago to these charms. Manet and Monet and Degas and Forin and Chavannes and Steinlin and Homer and Alexander and Shannon

have heard and heeded, and so have many others, these principles unassumingly and intelligently worked out by Kiyonaga, Harunobu, Hiroshige, Hokusai, and all that earnest succession of workers in Japan who have for the last fifteen or twenty years exerted on European art its strongest influence.

It is to Moronobu, whose art was distinctly influenced by Matahei (or Matabei), that we must credit the founding of the art of Nishiki-ye. These early prints were done in outline which was simple and rugged and were tinted by hand. He was succeeded in the new art by Kiyonobu, Kiyomasu, Kiyoshige, and in the last of the Seventeenth and the first of the Eighteenth Century the color blocks as well as the outline or key blocks were used. It was with Harunobu in about 1760, that the art came into a fine perfection, and the choice examples of this sensitive and subtle master are most beautiful in color, sentiment and execution.

His prints were for the most part rather small — some eight by ten inches. His women were slender and lithe — exquisite. His composition was interesting and unusual; his space always admirably filled; his color delicious, soft, mellow, harmonious, fresh.

So closely allied to him as to have been confounded with him by some writers was Koriusai — a superb artist who worked about 1770. His prints follow the sizes of Harunobu, though he produced many long narrow prints which were to the people what the kakemono were to the rich. These were called hashira-kake, and were intended for hanging on the posts in Japanese houses. The use of black, the reds and the flow of line are all admirably illustrated in Koriusai's work.

Buncho (1796), Shunsho (1792), Shunko (1800), were able men, fine colorists whose prints were chiefly of actors.

Following the styles of Harunobu and Koriusai is Kiyonaga (1742-1815). He

made many prints of the small rectangular form such as was used by Harunobu and Koriūsai, and also adopted the larger, longer shape (about ten by thirteen inches), which was afterwards used so generally by print makers. He also made many long narrow hashira-kake.

His work is virile; a sweep and power of line, no faltering, no hesitancy, spontaneous and certain. He is fond of the red (*beni*), which frequently appears in his prints, and is distinguished in his forcible and satisfactory spotting of blacks. Yet with all this virility there is an almost feminine nicety in the development of detail in an embroidered kimono or accessory.

Prints by Harunobu, Koriūsai and Kiyonaga are very difficult to obtain.

A unique genius who produced but little is Sharaku whose work is most highly esteemed by the French. He was best known for his great heads of actors in different roles—full of character; ugly and satisfactory.

We now come to Utamaro (1753-1805), who, although a pupil of Sekiyen, was especially influenced by Kiyonaga. His subjects, for the most part, are girls, superbly costumed, conversing or engaged in games or other occupations. He produced a great amount of work of a high quality. He has not the naivete of Harunobu nor the strength of Kiyonaga, but there is an elegance and a grace in all his work and his color is superb. He apparently feels the shortness of the Japanese women to be a defect, and, taking an artist's license, makes his women as long and lithe as Burne-Jones has his English women. He influenced the work of his successors, as Kiyonaga had influenced him.

Working at the same time was Yeishi, whose name brings quickly to the mind delicate, sinuous outlines, a certain feminine elegance, suavity, not force. His prints impress one for these qualities and for their admirable color. He shows an especial

fondness for yellows and purples which he handles with great skill. His work is rare and highly prized.

Toyoharu (1733-1814) was an artist whose subjects lay in the field of landscape and whose painstaking, conscientious work showed splendid fruition, if not in his own too red prints, in those of his pupil Toyohiro and his pupil Toyokuni I.

The work of Toyohiro, though not often seen, is of rare distinction and careful finish and detail.

The work of Toyokuni I is more often seen, and in the early period shows strongly the influence of Toyohiro. It is chaste, conscientious and distinguished. Prints of his early and middle period, when he worked patently under the influence of Utamaro, are especially choice. He produced a prodigious quantity of prints of varied value. He was the master of two able men, Kunisada, who, on his death, took the name Toyokuni II, and Kuniyoshi.

Shunyei, whose prints are rarely seen and who had many of the qualities which charm us in the work of Harunobu, is a name not to be passed by. We have reproduced an example of his work, as fine in sentiment as it is vigorous in treatment.

We now reach, chronologically, a man who stands in a class by himself—an independent. He is as bold and original a figure in the art of Japan as was Manet in the art of Europe. Hokusai was born in 1760. His father, a mirror maker, apprenticed him to a block cutter. He decided, however, to be a designer of Nishiki-ye, and studied with Shunsho. His early work, under the signature Sori, is much under his master's influence. Hokusai was expelled from the school for his independence and started on a walking trip to Nagoya, a journey he afterward depicted so well with its scenes and types. To have walked the Tokaido road was in those days an education in itself. At Nagoya he produced his famous

Magwa, a book of sketches of people and things in black and white—a book as alive to-day as when it was made, full of fun and truth and caricature, a real Uki-yo-ye or mirror of the passing world. He was a keen observer, an able draughtsman, a prodigious worker, a student all his life. At ninety, when he died, he said, “If fate had given me five more years to live, I should have been able to become a true painter.”

Strongly influenced by the work of Utamaro and Toyokuni I was Yeizan (not to be confounded with Yeisen). He worked from 1800 to 1830, and his prints are most excellent in color—often so like the work of Utamaro as to be distinguished from his with difficulty. There is always in these prints a great charm of color—greens, yellows, purples and reds of so many shades and half shades, and so admirable a balance and reserve in their use, that it is of this color-pleasure we first think when this name is mentioned.

Keisai Yeisen was an able man, especially in landscapes. His hand is somewhat heavier than that of Hiroshige. There is an honest assertiveness joined with acute observation in his work. In his figures he has fine color and a pleasant development of detail. He collaborated with Hiroshige in some series of landscapes. Suddenly, in the height of his success, he stopped making prints and started the making of children's toys and explained this change to a friend by saying he feared he would become famous. Unfortunate man — in spite of his efforts he is famous.

Kunisada (1785-1864), who took his master's name on his death and whose later prints were signed Toyokuni II, is a man who has produced many rich and handsome prints.

Kuniyoshi, a fellow pupil with Kunisada of Toyokuni I, is a most satisfactory man. His work shows an interesting endeavor to work out principles brought into Japan

The Great Pine. Hiroshige.

Kōchōrō Tōkoku was an able man, especially in landscapes. His hand is somewhat heavier than that of Hiroshige. There is an honest sensitiveness joined with acute observation in his work. In his figures he has fine color and a pleasant development of detail. He collaborated with Hiroshige in some series of landscapes. Suddenly, in the height of his success, he stopped making prints and started the making of children's toys and explained this change to a friend by saying he feared he would become famous. Unfortunate man—in spite of his efforts he is famous.

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by the Dutch. His work is sturdy and admirable.

Contemporary with these last three artists was Hiroshige I—an artist's artist. He was a pupil of Toyohiro. His early work shows plainly his master's influence and is conscientious and painstaking, but later his own characteristics prevailed, and we find it broader and simpler. He has done admirable work both as a figure and landscape painter, but it is in this latter field that he is most distinguished. He has, with simple tones and virile lines and harmonious color, transferred to us freshly and forcibly his impression of nature. He is an impressionist in the best sense of the word. A magician—he fixes on paper the evanescent phases of nature: the morning sky, the misty rice fields, the wind in the reeds, the hazy trees, the driving rain, the soft-falling snow, the silence and hush of a morning after a heavy snowfall, the scurry of carts and people over a bridge to escape a shower, the folks

one sees in the streets, the glory of a sunset, the silvery mystery of a moonlit night. We awake, after looking at his prints, with a shock of discovery. We are living, unheeding, in just such a charming world. He has made life more worth living.

Hiroshige ceased to work about the time that Japan, answering the loud knock on her doors, opened them to a curious and insistent throng who have turned her studios into factories and her aesthetics into commercialism.

In this short resume the names of a few artists only have been mentioned. Of much importance are those of Toyonobu, Kiyomitsu, Shiginobu, Shigemasa, that greatest of flower painters Masayoshi, Shunko, Shunzan, Choki, Yeisho, Hidimaro, Shikimaro, Yeiri, Kiyomine, Hokuba, Shunsen, Kuni-masa, Sugakudo, Kuniyasu, Hokkei (the able pupil of Hokusai), Hokujiu, Gakutei, Shigenobu (the erratic son-in-law of Hokusai), and Gekko, the modern follower of Hokusai.

It requires at first, perhaps, a little effort to look at these works of art from the point of view of the artists who conceived and executed them. They are so different from the art we are accustomed to and which we have, by environment and tradition, accepted as the touch-stone, that at first they seem strange to us. Before judging any work of art, however, we should consider what was the artist's point of view, what he had in mind, what he wished to do, then we would be in a position to decide whether he had accomplished his end. If he has, even though his point of view may differ from our own, he has succeeded.

The attitude of these print makers is so normal, so sane, so natural that it requires but little effort to see things through their eyes, and if we go so far, the next step follows. They have succeeded.

THE list of signatures which follows has been carefully prepared by Mr. Kihachiro Matsuki. The signatures will be of especial value as the characteristics of the artist's writing have been preserved.

國芳

Kuni

yoshi

ga

如漢

Hok

kei

英泉

Yei

sen

廣重筆

Hiro

shige

hitsu (brush)

重信

Shige

nobu

春信

Haru

nobu

湖龍齋画

Ko

riu

sai

ga (painted)

清長

Kiyo

naga

春潮

Shun

cho

春英

Shun

yei

哥 Uta
磨 maro
榮 Yei
之 shi
栄 Yei
昌 sho
豊 Toyo
廣 hiro

豊 Toyo
國 kuni
北 Hoku
斎 sai
英 Yei
山 zan
清 Kiyo
峯 mine
國 Kuni
貞 sada
包 ga

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